

33,000 criticize gas-well project

By Joe Bauman

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Environmental and recreation-oriented groups have generated 33,000 comments opposing a gas well project proposed for a location 40 miles south of Vernal.



Deseret Morning News graphic

Nearly all of the comments are in the form of a form letter created through Internet connections, says a Bureau of Land Management official. But all of the concerns will be analyzed, he says.

The Rock House Project is planned by a company named Enduring Resources, which has offices in Denver and Vernal. The site is about 40 miles south of Vernal and one mile south of the White River in Uintah County, according to an environmental assessment.

Enduring Resources would like to develop 55 natural gas wells with roads, pipelines and well pads, the document adds. These would be on BLM, state and private land. The wells would be drilled from 30 pads, of which six are already in place and 24 are proposed.

"Approximately 11.2 miles of new roads would be constructed to access the proposed well pads, and if the associated wells go into production, approximately 9.7 miles of surface gas lines would be constructed along the proposed access roads," says the document.

Stephen Bloch, attorney for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, said the large number of responses came because "we reached out" to SUWA's membership and other groups approached their members. Joining with SUWA

are the Natural Resources Defense Council and The Wilderness Society.

Also, local river outfitters joined the effort, says a SUWA press release.

A state comment on the project said the development has "the potential to produce significant emissions" that might damage air quality.

"The White River is one of these very special places in Utah that people feel passionate about," said Bloch in a telephone interview. "And they feel it should be protected."

At a minimum, he said, the BLM should prepare a full-blown Environmental Impact Statement "to fully understand and evaluate the impacts of this natural gas project." His group and others concerned about the project are urging the BLM to "think first, then act."

"Thirty-three thousands-plus citizens from across the country had to sit and read this thing (environmental assessment) and send in their comments," he added. "You know, that should mean something, and the BLM should be listening."

"We hope that they're going to listen."

A letter from the environmental groups to the BLM was posted on SUWA's Web site. Dated Nov. 20, the letter states that the development "would definitely have adverse impacts on the visual resources, the area's abundant natural quiet, and wildlife."

Kelly Buckner, environmental coordinator for the BLM's Vernal Field Office, said 32,975 comments were made by form letter created by SUWA, with the statements identical except for names and addresses. "There was a second form letter that had 103 comments," he said.

Most of the form letter comments were received through e-mail, he said.

"Then we received in the neighborhood of 40 or 50 other letters," he said. Some were one-of-a kind, and sometimes a comment would come in electronically and also by mail, because the person wanted to make sure the BLM received the comment.

Comments have not been analyzed yet. A contractor is "in the process of compiling all the comments, putting them into categories," he said.

The BLM and not the contractor will make any decisions about the project "because all these comments come back to us for our review."

Asked whether an environmental impact statement was possible for the project, Buckner replied, "Anything is possible, but I don't know that that's on the agenda at this point."

One of the main purposes of the National Environmental Policy Act is "to get responses from the public," he said. "The fact that these people have responded tells me that the NEPA process is working correctly."

He did not know when the BLM would decide whether to issue an environmental impact statement or take another action.

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